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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [KPAL](#) [IZ](#) [LE](#) [IS](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: MAY 7 FELTMAN-SHAPIRO MEETING IN DAMASCUS: FM  
MUALLIM QUESTIONS U.S. COMMITMENT TO REAL ENGAGEMENT

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (S/NF) Summary: In a wide-ranging May 7 discussion, NEA Acting A/S Feltman and NSC/NENA Senior Director Shapiro heard a litany of complaints from the Syrian side led by FM Muallim over Syria's designation as a state sponsor of terrorism, renewal of U.S. sanctions, and the lack of serious engagement with Syria on Middle East peace issues. The Syrians took credit for advancing positive relations with Iraq, restraining March 8 forces in Lebanon, constructively influencing Hamas, and facilitating the Embassy's search for a new compound site. Feltman and Shapiro argued that Washington had expanded access for Syria's Ambassador to Washington, was serious about engaging Syria, and remained committed to pursuing comprehensive peace (including between Syria and Israel). Feltman and Shapiro emphasized the U.S. priority of stopping foreign fighters entering Iraq from Syria and proposed a U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi security cooperation dialogue as a way advancing mutual interests and validating both sides' ability to work together. They also urged Syria use its influence constructively in Lebanon and with Hamas. Demonstrating no give, the Syrian side insisted bilateral cooperation would be "unnatural" until the U.S. better demonstrated its intentions for more normal relations. Cooperation on Iraqi security first required establishment of a "political umbrella," Muallim insisted. End Summary

12. (S/NF) Returning to Damascus two months after their March 7 visit, NEA Acting Assistant Secretary Jeffrey Feltman and NSC Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa Dan Shapiro met May 7 for four-and-a-half hours with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Muallim, Vice Foreign Minister Faisal Miqdad, and the President Asad's Political and Media Advisor Bouthayna Shaaban. Charge and Pol-Econ Chief (notetaker) accompanied Feltman and Shapiro. Muallim's Chief of Staff Bassam Sabagh joined the Syrian side. This cable provides an overview of both sides' views on the re-engagement process. It should be read with septel reports on Iraq, sanctions, Palestinian issues, Syrian-Israeli peace

talks, Iran, Lebanon, and human rights.

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Review of Positive Steps  
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¶3. (S/NF) Acting A/S Feltman opened the meeting by noting the positive steps the U.S. and Syria had taken since his March 7 visit to Damascus. Consistent with the President's commitment, U.S. officials were publicly pursuing a comprehensive peace between Israel and its neighbors that included two-state solution between Israel and the Palestinians and between Syria and Israel. The U.S. had dispatched several recent high-level official visits to Damascus, in addition to the travel of six Congressional delegations since January 2009. The State Department had rescinded restrictions on the access to Executive Branch officials for Syrian Ambassador Imad Moustafa; Moustafa had met with State Department and NSC officials several times before and since March 7. Feltman and other U.S. officials, including Special Envoy Mitchell's deputy Fred Hof, had attended the Syrian Embassy's April 17 National Day reception in Washington, the first in four years. The U.S. had passed threat information regarding a potential threat to a Syrian official through Ambassador Moustafa. Though no official decisions had been taken, Washington was looking favorably at sending additional U.S. visitors to Damascus, including Special Envoy George Mitchell, to discuss comprehensive peace issues.

¶4. (S/NF) On the Syrian side, Feltman continued, the U.S. had taken positive note of the Syrian government's (SARG's) decision to allow the American Language Center to reopen. Washington was also pleased to see constructive SARG engagement on facilitating the U.S. Embassy's efforts to identify potential sites for a new embassy compound (NEC). The Syrian government had received a visit by A/S for Diplomatic Security, Eric Boswell. And the Syrian Embassy in Washington had issued many visas to U.S. personnel going to Syria, including Department of Homeland Security circuit riders conducting admission interviews for Iraqi refugees in Syria. The U.S. hoped for more Syrian gestures, such as agreement for the Embassy's Defense Attache and his deputy; it also hoped the Syrian government would grant wider access to Embassy officials. While there remained significant differences between the two countries, both sides were taking steps to signal their interest in building mutual confidence. We hoped the Syrian side viewed the progress of relations positively, Feltman said.

¶5. (S/NF) Muallim acknowledged the symbolic importance of U.S. officials attending Syria's national day reception in Washington and joked Ambassador Moustafa's increased access to U.S. officials had generated more reporting from the Syrian Embassy and a lot more work for the MFA. The Syrian government believed it had taken positive steps by facilitating the U.S. Embassy's bid to find an NEC site and granting permission to reopen the American Language Center.

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Syria Skeptical of U.S. Intentions  
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¶6. (S/NF) Strike 1: Terrorism Report. Muallim mentioned that Ambassador Moustafa had conveyed Acting A/S Feltman's desire to meet with President Asad. The SARG was not discriminating against him by withholding a meeting at that level; Asad had received former NEA A/S William Burns in the past. The difference, however, was that U.S.-Syrian relations had not moved beyond a confidence building mode. The U.S. had issued its annual report on terrorism the previous week, suggesting that deep differences between the two countries remained. Unlike Iran, Syria had chosen not to contest the report's conclusions publicly. But Damascus had interpreted the report as an indicator of Washington's view of the relationship. Muallim added that Syria did not hide its support of groups resisting Israeli occupation of Arab lands;

this support would continue until Syria recovered the occupied Golan. The fact that the U.S. defined Syria's support of "legitimate resistance" as terrorism was not a good sign, Muallim asserted.

17. (S/NF) Strike 2: Sanctions. The U.S. President's upcoming re-certification of E.O. 13338 and the continuation of the Syrian Accountability Act was another sign that the U.S. was not ready for "natural relations" with Syria, continued Muallim. While both sides had taken steps, they faced a choice. "Either you go gradually and miss an opportunity, or you go directly. We have instructions to pursue normal relations, but it seems that parts of the U.S. government are still reluctant," Muallim said. Vice Minister Miqdad interjected that the U.S. administration's hesitation to advance the civil aviation and spare parts issue signaled another sign of U.S. reluctance to engage fully. Muallim pushed for U.S. assistance in convincing European companies that the U.S. Government would not punish them for working with Syrian Air. "Imagine how these companies will view the White House statement on the Syrian Accountability Act," he said, arguing that the U.S. administration needed to send them a message that it was acceptable to work with Syria on

civil aviation. Feltman and Shapiro explained they had sought to time their visit well in advance of the White House's notification on E.O. 13338 to discuss the action privately rather than through the media. President Asad's travel to Europe, however, had precluded this possibility. Feltman and Shapiro added the SARG should urge European countries to consult the Department of Commerce, but pledged to examine whether there might be a way to accommodate Syria's request. (Note: more detailed discussion on sanctions-related issues is reported septel.)

18. (S/NF) Strike 3: Secretary's Trip to Iraq and Lebanon. Syria's skepticism had also increased after recent statements by Secretary Clinton in Iraq and Lebanon regarding Hizballah and the increase in foreign fighters coming from Syria, said Muallim, who disputed the accuracy of such statements. Feltman replied that the Secretary's remarks had come in response to pointed questions after their recent April 28 visit to Iraq; her prepared statement had taken care to avoid any recriminations, he said. Just as the U.S. knew it had an unwelcome reputation in many parts of the Arab world, Syria had a negative image in the U.S. Congress. Though Syria was trying to improve this image, the Secretary's remarks reflected concerns about Hizballah and Hamas and support for armed resistance, which the USG viewed as supporting terrorism. Syrian officials should not be surprised that their U.S. counterparts are as transparent about these concerns as Syrians are about their views about the legitimacy of resistance. Muallim responded he was not surprised.

19. (S/NF) Strike 4: No Movement on Peace Discussions. Muallim and Presidential Advisor Shaaban argued Syria had expressed its desire for peace talks with Israel, even as Israeli PM Netanyahu backtracked from previous Israeli government commitments. "Where was the U.S.?" asked Shaaban. Special Envoy Mitchell had met with the IRA, and "everyone knows the IRA killed more people than either Hizballah or Hamas," she claimed. What was Mitchell doing in Morocco, when Syria was the key to achieving comprehensive peace? she asked. Feltman responded that the President would be holding in-depth discussions on peace issues with PM Netanyahu, Egyptian President Mubarak, and PA President Mahmoud Abbas. Washington expected Mitchell to visit Syria in the coming weeks; his deputy Fred Hof would be seeking a meeting with Ambassador Moustafa the coming week, he said. (Septel provides discussion on discussions on Syrian-Israeli peace discussions.)

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Debate over Who's Really Serious  
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¶10. (S/NF) Senior Director Shapiro urged Muallim to recognize the real opportunity available to both sides. President Obama had articulated a broad vision for productive relations with Syria and other states in the region. The U.S. recognized it had a role in achieving this vision, but others need to recognize their responsibilities as well. Syria's stated desire to move to more natural relations should include some acknowledgment of its role in making it happen. The U.S. had publicly recognized its mistakes, e.g., use of torture methods, and would continue to take steps. But others needed to reciprocate to ensure that the opportunity did not pass.

¶11. (S/NF) Acting A/S Feltman commented that the President's decision to close Guantanamo, withdraw from Iraq, and make clear decrees on torture had given opponents ammunition to

criticize the administration. In this context, there was growing vocal opposition on Capitol Hill and from other quarters to the decision to engage Syria. The U.S. President had repeatedly stated his desire to pursue comprehensive peace on all tracks, including between Syria and Israel, even as his critics argued his policies were weakening U.S. national security. The administration was clear in its desire for change, but that change was not going to occur overnight.

¶12. (S/NF) Syria wanted changes in substance, not words, responded Muallim. If U.S.-Syrian relations were normal, then "we'll listen to you as a partner," he said. Even in Iraq, where the two countries had compelling mutual interests in cooperating, it would first be necessary to "remove the obstacles in our bilateral relations." Feltman and Shapiro emphasized Washington placed a high priority on stopping the flow of foreign fighters from Syria into Iraq and proposed a U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi security dialogue as a way to make tangible progress in the relationship on an issue of mutual interest. (Note: Detailed discussion on the U.S. proposal to establish a U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi security provided septel.)

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Syria: We're Taking Tangible Steps  
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¶13. (S/NF) Presidential Advisor Shaaban opined there was no doubt that President Obama's positive language had created a real opportunity; realizing its full potential depended on how both sides responded. Syrian officials believed that Syria should have a say in the U.S. vision for the region. Syria was influencing Hamas leader Khaled Meshaal to play a more constructive role; who else would the U.S. credit for Meshaal's recent statement that Hamas was seeking to be "part of the solution," and for Hamas's decision to suspend rocket fire in Gaza? The U.S. needed to recognize these contributions instead of focusing only on the negatives, Shaaban asserted. Shapiro replied the U.S. recognized Syria's role but believed Hamas still had a long way to go before it would be ready to work constructively with the Palestinian Authority and be a responsible partner in a Palestinian state. He also urged Syria to use its influence to help win the release of Israeli captive Gilad Shalit. (Note: More detailed discussion on Palestinian issues covered septel.)

¶14. (S/NF) Muallim added that Syria had followed through on its commitment to improve relations with Iraq and Lebanon. Muallim recounted his positive late-March trip to Baghdad and Asad's productive meeting with Iraqi PM Maliki at the Arab League Summit in Doha. Syrian PM Utri had traveled with over a dozen ministers to Baghdad for high-level discussions and to sign agreements on economic and security cooperation. Later, in a one-on-one with Acting A/S Feltman, Muallim reported plans for PM Maliki and President Asad to attend a reconciliation conference for all Iraqi factions, either in Damascus or Baghdad.

¶15. (S/NF) In Lebanon, continued Muallim, Syria had

refrained from interfering in the upcoming elections. There had been almost no commentary from the Syrian press on the release of the four Lebanese generals, reflecting the Syrian regime's desire to avoid increasing electoral tensions. The fact that UN investigators had been able to hold these Lebanese officials for four years without charging them was a grave injustice, Muallim said. But Syria continued to exercise restraint and was urging its friends in Lebanon to do the same.

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Impetus Lies with U.S.  
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¶16. (S/NF) Sparked by Acting A/S Feltman's suggestion that Syria could improve its image in the U.S. by taking positive steps on human rights (septel), Presidential Advisor Shabaan replied, "Nothing we do will help our image in the U.S." FM Muallim commented that "only positive statements by your government will help our image; if you want better relations, it is your responsibility to help." NSC Senior Director Shapiro responded that Syria also had a responsibility -- what was it willing to do to improve relations? he asked. Muallim blamed the previous administration's policies for severely damaging U.S.-Syrian relations. "Obama didn't create these problems, but he has to fix them if we're going to move forward." Syria, he claimed, "was ready" to move forward in cooperating in all fields.

¶17. (S/NF) Shapiro and Feltman argued that President Obama had taken great steps in his first 100 days in office and could not be held responsible for the previous administration's policies. Feltman asked whether Muallim was suggesting that no progress was possible without U.S. gestures first. "No," replied Muallim, "we should move together." He reiterated, however, that convincing the Syrian regime to take concrete steps would require the U.S. to signal its readiness for a "normal" relationship. "You can't do this if you're continuing the sanctions policy of the previous regime," he said. Feltman and Shapiro reiterated the administration's strong support for comprehensive peace in the region and its belief in engaging all countries to solve problems and promote common interests.

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Review of the Bidding  
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¶18. (S/NF) Acting A/S Feltman and NSC Senior Director Shapiro proposed Syrian steps on:

-- Iraq: Muallim responded "neither yes nor no" to Feltman's pitch to facilitate a U.S.-Syrian-Iraqi security dialogue, saying he would have to consult "his leadership." Muallim said he had no further response to U.S. information regarding foreign fighter facilitator Abu Khalaf al Shamari. Feltman passed tear-line information on four additional foreign fighter facilitators; Muallim accepted the list, but made no commitments to follow up.

-- Hamas: Shapiro and Feltman pushed Muallim on Hamas's acceptance of Quartet principles. They also pressed Muallim to use Syria's influence to win Gilad Shalit's release, or at least allow Shalit to communicate with his family. Muallim responded Hamas had issued positive statements recently in support of a two-state solution. Priority should be given to a ceasefire and Palestinian reconciliation, he said.

-- Human Rights: Arguing that showing more leniency to political prisoners would be the right thing to do and help Syria's image in the U.S. and Europe, Feltman pressed Muallim on releasing democracy activists Riad Seif and Michel Kilo. Muallim bristled, mentioned the "human rights issues" regarding some 1300 al-Qaeda-linked Salafists in Syrian jails ("should we release them, too?"), defended the Syrian

judicial process, and rejected interference in Syria's sovereign affairs.

-- Lebanon: Feltman urged Muallim to continue exercising restraint on Syria's allies in Lebanon during the final month of the Parliamentary election campaign. Muallim reaffirmed Syria's desire for peaceful elections and argued that a national unity government represented the most stable solution for Lebanon, but stated that the formation of a government was a Lebanese matter.

119. (SBU) Acting A/S Feltman and NSC Senior Director Shapiro cleared this message.

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